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ABSTRACT

Differences in the personal and career characteristics of men and women secondary principals were examined by comparing data from a study of women high school principals with data from a National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) study on the secondary school principalship. Data for the study of women principals were provided by 97 women secondary principals who completed the same questionnaire used in the NASSP study of 1,131 male and female principals. The comparison revealed that a larger percentage of women than men principals were minority group members and a smaller percentage majored in educational administration. Although the women entered administration at approximately the same age as the men, they became principals somewhat later. Men principals appeared to have higher career aspirations than did their female counterparts. In several categories women principals exhibited greater job satisfaction than that of their male counterparts. This study suggests further studies on the relationships between career patterns and job performance. (Author/JM)

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MALE AND FEMALE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS:

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

by

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In 1976 Gross and Trask[1] published an important study on sex differences in job performance in the elementary school principalship. Their findings have since led to other studies of the principalship and of sex-linked characteristics in school management. To date, however, those studies have rarely extended to the secondary level--perhaps, if for no other reason, because of the dearth of female secondary school principals in every state in the nation. We have very little information on women in secondary school principalships beyond some demographic data. This study was undertaken as a first step in learning more about women in educational management--in this case, the career paths and attitudes which shape the professional lives of women in school administration.

The data on women secondary school principals used here were part of information collected in a national study of the career paths and attitudes of women educators in administrative line positions. That study, completed in August, 1977, suffered from the necessity to compare the data on women in the study's sample with data on male principals which was over ten years old. Recently, however, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) completed a study on the secondary school principalship[2], the data for which were collected at the same time as the data for the study of

[1]Gross, N. and Trask, A.E., The Sex Factor and the Management of Schools, New York: Wiley and Sons, 1976.

[2]Byrne, D.R., Hines, S.A. and McCleary, L.E., The Senior High School Principalship Volume I: The National Survey, Reston, Virginia: NASSP, 1978.

women administrators. A reanalysis at this time of the data from the study of women administrators and a comparison with the data on their male counterparts thus appears both warranted and interesting, inasmuch as both studies were conducted at the same time and asked some of the same questions. In particular, the data on women principals now can be isolated and studied more carefully with reference to the NASSP study.

Purpose of the Study

The NASSP study was undertaken because "high schools are a significant and vital part of American life. In fact, interest in (them)...is so intense that the principalship as a position and the principal as a person are in the spotlight." Beyond that, however, the principalship, and those who hold that position, seem important to study because the position serves as a significant first step in the management ladder of one of America's most important bureaucracies--the public school system. As we move towards a greater understanding of that management system and its effects on schools and school clients it becomes necessary to know as well about those who serve as managers and the attributes--including those which are sex-linked--which contribute to their effectiveness. The comparison of male and female high school principals undertaken in this paper is but a first phase in gaining that knowledge.

Research Design and Sample

Data for the study of women principals were provided by 97 women, who represented 34.2 percent of the identified population of 284 public senior high school women principals. Data for the NASSP study came from 1,131 male and female principals in both public and private high schools, or 70.6 percent of the identified representative sample of 1,600. Of the 1,131 principals in the NASSP study, 7 percent, or 79, were women. Respondents in both studies completed a questionnaire which followed the format of the questionnaire used in a 1965 NASSP study of the senior high school principalship.

The respondents in the study of women administrators were not necessarily the respondents in the NASSP study. For example, only 2 percent of the former study's respondents were from the New England region and 27 percent were from West Coast states; in the NASSP study, on the other hand, 9 percent of all respondents and 15 percent of the women respondents were from New England, while only 6 percent and 11 percent, respectively, were from the Far West and Northwest. Despite these regional differences, however, the respondents in both samples appear to be fairly equivalent. The overwhelming majority of women in both studies are now employed in schools in larger towns and cities (70 percent of female principals in the NASSP study; 62.5 percent of the female principals in the Paddock study). In the present study 16.8 percent women principals identified their districts as being the same size

or larger than most districts in their respective states, and 17.9 percent said their district was the largest in the state. Most of the reported schools are comprehensive senior high schools.

Findings

A comparison of the findings of the study of women administrators with those of the NASSP study reveals the following information about men and women senior high school principals:

1) Age: Women principals tend to be slightly older than their male counterparts. The modal age for the former is 50, while that of the latter is 44. This age difference has other ramifications, as noted later in this paper.
2) Race: Significantly more women than men are minority group members. The NASSP sample is 96 percent Caucasian, while 78.9 percent of the women in the 1977 study are Caucasian.
3) Undergraduate major: Women principals are more likely to have majored in education or the humanities (45.3 percent), while men more often majored in the sciences or social sciences (46 percent). These data support earlier studies which show that education is traditionally a first-choice occupation for women and a second-choice occupation for men.

4) Graduate major: Fewer women than men majored in educational administration, as distinct from other fields of education, at the graduate level. This is true for women in all degree programs; even at the specialist level, where most women majored in educational administration (70 percent, as compared to 60 percent at the doctoral level and 24.4 percent at the master's level), there are fewer women proportionally than there are men in all degree programs combined (71 percent). Women do not seek the specialized training in educational leadership as frequently as do their male counterparts.

5) Career pattern: Women principals were appointed to their first principalship at an older age than men (modal age of 40 years as compared to a modal age range of 30-34 for men). This difference is reflected in the age discrepancy noted above and also in the later age at which advanced training in administration was sought. Moreover, the time before service as principal is time spent by women in a variety of district staff positions--experiences which are, incidentally, absent in the administrative background of most men principals. Once in the principalship, however, men and women demonstrate remarkably similar career patterns; there

is a strong tendency to remain in the same principalship for a period of time and to be relatively immobile in terms of geographic location of jobs. There is also a strong indication that, for both men and women, the principalship does indeed serve as a first step in the career ladder of school management; for both groups the average length of time in the principalship is approximately four years, after which time the incumbents often move into an assistant superintendency or a superintendency, sometimes within the same district.

6) Career aspirations: Men principals appear to have higher career aspirations or goals than their female counterparts. A large number of women in the 1977 study either had no career plans or goals or indicated uncertainty regarding their plans (66.4 percent).

7) Job satisfaction: In several categories (job security, prestige, self-fulfillment, etc.) women principals exhibited greater job satisfaction than that of their male counterparts. Women principals also indicated more frequently than did men that, if given a second chance, they would make the same career choice.

8) Present position and salary: In public schools, men and women held roughly equivalent positions,

in terms of school size and comprehensiveness. Women principals earned slightly less money than men, but the difference was not significant.

Discussion

The importance of the comparison of findings from the 1977 studies lies in the light they shed on schools as institutions, as well as the information they provide us about women in educational management. The data indicate that, in some ways, women resemble men; although they are slightly older, and more representative of cultural, religious and ethnic minorities in the country than are men principals, both men and women principals still demonstrate a middle-class and upward-mobility bias in their social backgrounds. To the extent that educational leaders--whether male or female--diverge from this stereotype, schools begin to reflect more closely the heterogeneity of American society.

However, women are also quite different from men who serve as secondary principals. Of particular significance are the differences in their aspirations and satisfactions--differences which undoubtedly are due to both societal and institutional factors. These differences appear to be critical areas for both training and research.

Finally, the separate studies done in 1977 provide the background data and the opportunity to conduct further investigations à la Gross and Trask on sex differences in performance

in the secondary school principalships. For example, it is important to determine whether different career patterns and attitudes--which are associated with but not limited to women in the principalship--result in differing kinds, levels, or directions in job performance. If this is indeed the case we may then be able to predict job performance for any individual based on his or her attitudes and expectations. Selection of educational leaders then becomes tied more closely to actual performance rather than to demonstration of academic achievement. This appears particularly critical at the secondary school principal level, for it is from this pool that districts draw their assistant superintendents and superintendents.